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PUBLIC PROVISION AND RESPONSIBILITY FOR PLAY- GROUNDS

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The play movement, like other social and educational movements that have come under public control, began as a private philanthropy. Five years ago, probably nine-tenths of all the playgrounds in this country were being carried on in this way; to-day a half or more are under some city department. There can be no question of the tendency all over the country, it is strongly toward public support and public control. Where this movement is to lead us the future must decide, but the indications are that the present developments are only the beginnings of a movement of nearly universal extent and very profound significance.

Before one can discuss intelligently the question of play and the responsibility of the public to furnish it, it becomes necessary to consider the nature and function of play in the life of the child, and the kind of responsibility that the government, in its larger or smaller units, owes to its constituents.

To the childlike man of Plato and Carlyle, who has not lost in the commonplace relations of everyday the ability to wonder at the really marvelous, there are few things more mysterious than play. For all this intensity of effort that leaves him breathless and exhausted, the child is no richer or wiser, no better clothed or fed; he has apparently gained nothing. Whence this abounding energy, not displayed in other things? Whence this richness of emotional content and joy without any apparent advantage? Play is the beauty of childhood and tints with its auroral hues the dawn to which we all look back at times with longing. In the bitter struggle of the ages in which every vestige of the useless was shorn away by the ruthless shears of selection, how is it that this inner spirit of poetry and joyousness has survived? For play, in fact, seems to be the expression of life itself, springing forth spontaneously everywhere as its first activity. We work because we must; we play be-

cause it is our nature. I know of no better basis for a theory of optimism than this.

There have been a series of explanations of play offered. Schiller and Spencer held that play was "surplus energy." Nerve cells have a natural instability. Built up by all incoming stimuli, they at length reach a point when, like intermittent springs, they must overflow. When the engine stands still at the station, it must blow off steam or blow up the boiler, and this is the state of the boy when work does not use up his nervous energy.

Professor Groos objects to this theory that "surplus energy" only requires that something should be done. It does not require that the animal or child should play. Why does not the boy at such times go out and saw wood? How account for the forms that play assumes in different animals? He says, on the other hand, that "play is an instinct that has served the purpose of education." "The animal does not play because it is young, but rather has a period of infancy in order that it may play." Play appears in the animal series at the point where training is necessary in order that the young may pursue the activities of the adults, and it serves to give this training. He says further, "If the kitten had not practised in springing upon flying leaves and rolling balls, the cat would not be able to capture its prey." Surplus energy is not the cause, but only a favorable condition for play.

If Groos had carried his theory to its natural conclusion, he would have had a very satisfactory theory of play. There is apparently only one way that action may become instinctive, and that is by its being endlessly repeated through unnumbered ages until it is pressed back from the higher conscious levels into the lower sub-conscious ones and ultimately into the very structure of the nervous mechanism itself. Dr. Hall has probably given us the best statement and explanation of play in "Adolescence." All plays are remnants or survivals of the previous activities of the race. As the savage state was much the longest evolutionary period, so this has furnished in the type of the chase, the fleeing and pursuit, the finding and hiding away, the dodging and catching, the throwing and striking, which constitute the elements of all motor plays. The joy of the original was the joy of capture and escape, the joy of survival when the struggle was very bitter, and famine and violence lay in wait or savagely pursued our ferine ancestor. There

was thus connected with these movements and co-ordinations at the beginning an intense emotional content; to run fast or to hide away meant escape and life, to pursue and capture, to find and strike down with stone or club, meant relief from hunger and survival in the struggle. Hence, an intense pleasure became attached to these movements and co-ordinations at the beginning of things. The dawn of intelligence was the same. The primitive brain was lethargic, not easily stirred to action or judgment. It required the intense stimuli of danger and want to awaken it to quickness of judgment and intelligence of choice. Play has the same characteristics and has always performed the same function for the child. It is well known that the boy can run faster in playing tag than he can in going on an errand, that he will expend in a day's vigorous play far more energy than it is possible for him to develop in work. Certainly no system of education has thus far been devised that has the same value in arousing his intelligence. To play, and play alone, his whole physical, emotional, intellectual and social nature responds, and the child becomes a unit. It makes the same requirements of rapid judgments and instantaneous action then that the chase required of our ancestors. Up to a certain undetermined age play is far more educative than the conventional school, and there is far more reason for its being furnished by the community.

Probably play reached almost its lowest ebb in the history of the world in America during the latter half of the past century. Vigorous motor plays require a considerable space to carry them on. A boy can not play ball without a ball field, swim without a swimming place or climb trees without trees to climb, and these the city has not furnished. He can shoot craps or pitch pennies on the sidewalk, he can play jackstones or tell stories on a doorstep, he can do various things in the alleys and stables, but these are not the types of play by which the race developed or by which "in distant ages children grew to kings and sages."

The world of nature holds out to the child a thousand invitations whose subtle appeal he can scarce resist. The forest calls to him from its shadowy depths and speaks of mysteries hidden within that untraveled country, and of animals and birds' nests; the brook offers its minnows to catch and its waters that he may wade and bathe in; the tree lures the ape in him to its ancestral home. Every

animal is a new person to be loved and talked to and played with, and a dog is often as good as a whole gymnasium in the physical exercise he can promote. The city world of brick and stone, of asphalt streets and rushing cars has no such appeal. The brain was not evolved through reactions to these stimuli, and it is not until later that their charm is felt.

Play for any high development always requires good *camaderie* and leadership. The American city, which has mixed up Jews and Greeks and Italians and Slavs in a single community, has worked strongly against the development of that sense of trust and affection which is essential to highly organized and frequent play. There has been no community feeling, and any high degree of social leadership among children has been impossible.

These city communities, if such an aggregation of heterogeneous elements without community feeling can be so called, have had no common life and little if any sentiment in regard to play. Play has not been encouraged. Whereas, in ages past, mothers have always taught games to the little children, the crowded tenement and street have furnished no place for this, and the crowded program has left no time. The games of older children have always been handed on from one generation of children to the next by social tradition, but mixed races have no common traditions and games have not been transmitted.

I have been at the opening of many new playgrounds. The experience is the same everywhere, the children do not play much, but stand or rush about and talk or wrangle. On investigation, it will be found that, unless they have been taught them at the school, they know very few games, and these are usually not of the best type, but have often taken on vulgar expressions or a rudeness of manner from the street environment in which they have flourished.

I believe that all who have been closely associated with the playground movement are convinced that if we are to have a high type of really educative play, of sufficient quantity to give health and physical strength, and a quickening of the intelligence and the development of social habits, that the public must in some way furnish both the playground and the leadership, without which the playground is often a social menace.

The first attitude of the public mind toward this problem was that providing facilities for play was a new and very proper form

of charity, but was not a fitting use of public money. The discussion in the House of Representatives, which has on two occasions consumed nearly a day of the time of our national lawmakers, has hinged on this point.

There is, of course, little uniformity of opinion as to what sort of thing the state should furnish. Between the socialist, who would furnish everything, and the anarchist, who would furnish nothing, there is every conceivable grade of opinion. The policy of this country is not the same to-day that it was fifty years ago. There is an unquestionable tendency to the extension of the function of government all over the world, and each year sees the taking over of or prescribing regulations for some activity which had previously been regarded as a purely private undertaking, with which the public was not concerned. As the organization of society progresses, and the dependence of each on the welfare of all becomes closer, an increase of social control seems inevitable. As examples of this tendency one need only mention the present public provision of schools, and even colleges and universities, of parks and public baths, and the increasing powers of boards of health, of tenement house and building departments, of bureaus of corporations, etc. The conception of government that it exists "to protect every man in its rights" may not be sufficient to require the furnishing of playgrounds, but we have long outgrown this ideal.

The argument that is usually advanced for furnishing public schools is that the boy becomes a voter, and an illiterate electorate is a danger to the state, so the state must furnish the school for self-protection. This does not seem to give any direct reason for the public education of girls, but the argument applies equally well to the question of providing playgrounds. The fall of countries in the past has not been due so much to the lack of education of the people as it has to their unsocial tendencies and immorality, and the playgrounds have certainly as much to do with the elimination of these traits as the school. In times of war states require soldiers, who must have health and physical stamina, and these the playground can furnish more effectively than the school. For a government to be safe the people must be contented and happy, the seeds of anarchy must not be sown by general unrest. Perhaps the social opportunities of the neighborhood center or field-house, through the development of a spirit of friendliness and sociability,

can do as much as anything to bring back joy to life and quiet the restlessness.

I suppose, however, it is no longer necessary to limit the argument for furnishing playgrounds by the state to the consideration that the playground furnishes a fundamental form of education. The majority of cultured people would be ready to say at present that those things that are necessary for the general welfare and for use in common, where from the nature of the case they can not be furnished by the individual, should be furnished by the state. Especially is this true where the loss of these facilities would mean a serious retardation or checking of development and where, at best, they can be furnished more cheaply and efficiently by the state than by the individual.

Play offers just these conditions. Out of his play-life the child develops his health, his muscles, his emotions, his will, his quickness of judgment, and executive tendency and the intellect is stimulated into action as in no other way. Through all the ages, from the animal world up, play has been the fundamental form of education. The school has been only an accessory form at best. There have been great men who have never been to school, but the very nature of the child who is kept without play atrophies. Witness the appalling results of child labor in England in the eighteenth century, and the common observation in regard to playless children. From the nature of the case an individual parent or child can not furnish a playground in the city, because it is too expensive, and the very idea of a playground requires that there shall be many children who shall use it in common.

The playgrounds might be furnished like private schools and a small fee might be charged each child. I have no doubt that there is a real need for playgrounds of this sort, greater in fact than for private schools themselves. Play is far more democratic than any other form of activity and if parents wish their children to be aristocrats, it is more necessary that they have a private playground than that they have a private school. But this can not provide for the poor children any more than the private school can.

There seem to be only four possibilities in the situation: play facilities may not be provided at all, they may be provided by the state or individuals for a charge, they may be provided by the

state free, or they may be provided by charity. Play does not seem to be a fit object for charitable support, because it is not for any special class of children, but for all children. It requires, for the purchase of sites, construction of swimming pools and other facilities, an expense such as charity can not possibly bear, unless we are to have a very different sort of charity than the world thus far has known.

Since the children need the playgrounds, and they can not afford to pay a fee, and the expense is too great and not of a legitimate kind for charity, the only way left seems to be that they should be furnished free by the public. We need not be surprised, therefore, to note that practically all the large cities and many of the smaller ones, where the movement is well established, have now taken up the movement as a municipal undertaking, and are paying the expenses from public funds, while the cities where the playgrounds are maintained by private charity are the new cities that are just making a beginning.

Few movements have grown more rapidly than the playground movement. There were in the United States in the summer of 1907 ninety cities that were maintaining playgrounds. In the summer of 1908 there were one hundred and eighty-five. While during the past summer, from very imperfect statistics, we find record of three hundred and thirty-five cities—a movement growing so fast that, unless checked, it must soon become universal.

There has been a notable tendency during the past two years for the states to take up the movement and make some requirement or provision. The best known of the playground laws is the one passed by the state of Massachusetts in the spring of 1908. This law required every city of ten thousand or more population to vote whether or not it would maintain playgrounds. According to the latest statistics I have seen, forty-two cities have voted, and forty have voted "yes" with a majority of about five to one. The states of New Jersey, Ohio, Indiana and Minnesota have also passed laws within the last two years.

When the cities began to take up the play movement in earnest about ten years ago, the playgrounds were mostly located in school-yards. These yards were very small and the surface was unsuitable. The equipment usually consisted of a sandbox, four or five swings and a seesaw or two. They were usually maintained for a

half-day only during four or five weeks of the summer. To-day most of our municipal playgrounds are maintained for the entire year, and the school playgrounds for four or five months. The equipment has been successively increased by the addition of outdoor gymnasias, wading pools, swimming pools and field-houses, and the hours have been further increased by lighting them at night. Instead of the four or five hundred dollars that the cities were spending on a year's work, the city of Chicago alone is now spending more than five hundred thousand dollars per annum, and its plant represents an outlay, during the last six years, of more than eleven millions of dollars. Instead of the janitor or volunteer who were the first attendants at the playgrounds, a dozen colleges and universities are now giving courses of training for playground workers, and each of the park playgrounds of South Chicago has about twenty paid employees. The field-houses, costing from seventy to one hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars each, are beautiful in architecture, in finish, and their bright color effects. They provide two gymnasias each for indoor work, two small indoor and one large outdoor swimming pool, a branch library, a small restaurant, from two to four clubrooms and a large and beautiful auditorium. There is in charge of this public Young Men's Christian Association building, for the resemblance is close, a field-house director, who corresponds to a Young Men's Christian Association secretary, a superintendent or manager of the building, a physical director and an assistant for men, a physical director and an assistant for women. Their work is indoors from the 1st of November to the 1st of May, and outdoors from the 1st of May to the 1st of November. Besides these, there are many other employees as janitors, life-savers in the pools and the like. Evidently Chicago has gone on from the idea of furnishing play to the children to the idea of furnishing recreation to the people.

From the description it might be supposed that Chicago at least was furnishing adequate play facilities. This is far from being the case. We do not know very well what adequate facilities for play are, but we certainly know that they must be within walking distance of the children if they are to be attended. The effective range of a playground is different for children of different ages and sexes, for different cities and for different sections of the same city. It is even different for different playgrounds, and serves as a

pretty accurate measure of its attractiveness. It is also different for different facilities, a boy will not go as far to swing or attend a gymnasium class as he will to swim in the summer time. From the best statistics that we have been able to gather, the little children below six will not come regularly to a playground that is more than two blocks away, the children under nine or ten will not come over a quarter of a mile, and even the older children will not come regularly over a half-mile. These distances have been determined by the registration of the children attending the different playgrounds, but they are conditioned by the crowded state of the streets, the presence of street car or railroad tracks, and various factors that introduce an element of danger.

If we take the longest range of effectiveness in the playgrounds, this would mean for districts, where all the conditions are favorable, that a playground must be placed in the center of every square mile of the city's area, and with greater frequency in sections where the streets are crowded or there are elements of danger. This would require over two hundred playgrounds in place of the thirty-one that Chicago now has, in order to accommodate the older children alone, without attempting to make provision for the younger ones. For the smallest children even the crossing of the street unattended is dangerous in some sections and is not desirable in any section. The only safe and adequate provision that can be made for them is in the center of the block or on the roof. Berlin requires such play space in the center of tenement blocks, where it is under the park department. Many of the new model tenements in this country are making provision for the play of the children both on the roof and in the interior court.

Besides these, in order to provide for the middle-sized children, who have a range of about a quarter of a mile, there is need of many small playgrounds, some of which may be schoolyards.

The most needy children of all are the children in institutions of various kinds. They are there all the time, are very deficient in things to do, lack initiative, crave the society of adults and in general furnish the ideal conditions for the playground to do its best work. We have thus far scarcely done anything for them.

We must consider then that when it is said that a certain city provides playgrounds, that we mean a very different thing from what we mean when we say it provides schools. There is no city

in this country that is making provision for the play of more than a quarter, if it does for more than a tenth, of its children. The expression simply means that the city has made a beginning.

Thus far I have spoken only of the city problem, but the problem of play in the country is not much less than it is in the city. In some ways it is greater. The children are more scattered and the families are growing smaller and smaller, so that there often are not enough of them within range to have much play. The old life of hunting and fishing and adventure which was the lifeblood of the pioneer boy is gone. The farm-child is often growing up timid and unsociable and boorish from this general absence of common play. The country does not lack for space, but its need of organization and recreation is greater than that of the city.

In Germany they have an official whom we much need to borrow. He is known as a *Spiel Inspektor*, and his business is to organize outdoor sports and recreations over a considerable section of country. He arranges for picnics, athletics and swimming in summer, and for curling, tobogganing and skating in winter.

It does not seem to have yet occurred to the Conservation Association, that one of the great natural resources of any country or district is its recreational facilities. It is needless to mention the millions that Switzerland garners every year from her crop of tourists, or Florida's return from her ocean side and the smell of her orange blossoms, greater than all the products of her soil. Nearly every district has such facilities, quite uninventoried. Their development would often save the locality much money, that now goes to distant resorts, and furnish a needed relief in sections, much underplayed. Recreation is always more wholesome when taken near home, where the person is known and responsible, than it is at a distance, where nobody knows or cares what is done.

If the public is to be really responsible for the play of the children and the recreation of the people, I see no way of meeting this obligation except through an efficient organization to secure it. Since play is a universal need, play should be placed within reach of all. This, I believe, requires a general organization or department corresponding closely to the organization of the school system itself. This would mean at least a department and supervisor of playgrounds for every city, an official, corresponding to the German *Spiel Inspektor* for every county, a state department and superin-

tendent of playgrounds and a national recreation official at Washington. Such organization seems to me not merely desirable, but inevitable, if we are to secure efficiency and really furnish worthy play to the children; to be, in fact, a corollary of the idea of public responsibility. The general ineffectiveness of state laws that have behind them no machinery for their enforcement is a good example of the need.